



RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Historian Ada Palmer researches the history of ideas, writes science fiction, and has helped elect a new pope (c. 1470) four times.

By Carrie Golus, AB'91, AM'93

It's only the second day of Ada Palmer's history course, *Censorship from the Inquisition to the Present*. Already the class is deep into the vexed topic of "icky speech."

Take Suehiro Maruo's *Ultra-Gash Inferno* (Creation Books, 2001), from the "erotic grotesque" ("ero guro") genre of Japanese comics. The first time she read it, Palmer says, she was so disgusted she threw up. The next day, just remembering the experience, she threw up again.

Palmer passes the book—held shut by flimsy, loose rubber bands—around the class. "If you want to take the rubber bands off, you can," she says, "but I don't recommend it." For anyone brave enough to look, she's included an additional safeguard: a sticky note over

the worst part, "which is me censoring it," she points out.

(The book demonstrates how censorship's battleground is often at the margins, she explains later: "Few people would defend nauseating pornography, yet the book contains a protest about the postwar occupation of Japan—the kind of political speech that can be the most important to defend.")

Palmer has long flowing hair; she's wearing a long flowing blue cardigan, flared jeans with embroidered stripes down the sides, and chunky boots. The effect is not so much professorial as otherworldly, like a guide you might seek out on a difficult and frightening quest. In contrast, her coteacher Stuart McManus, a postdoctoral fellow at the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of

Knowledge, looks banker conservative in a blue-and-white pinstripe shirt, gray slacks, and black wingtips.

The censorship class—30 students, a mix of grads and undergrads—meets in an enormous classroom at the south end of Special Collections. Today’s assigned readings include chapters from *1984* (Harcourt Brace, 1949), the American Library Association’s “Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000–2009,” and a blog post by writer Neil Gaiman that sets the tone: “Why Defend Freedom of Icky Speech?”

Palmer’s syllabus requires no papers. Instead, the students will create an exhibit, *The History of Censorship*, to be held at Special Collections in September. Extra credit writing exercises include what she calls “Half and Half Again”: rewrite a paper from another class, making exactly the same arguments, in half as many words. Then cut it down by half again.

As *Ultra-Gash Inferno* makes its way around the class (most students do not open it), Palmer places Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (Rinehart, 1954) on the overhead projector. A few students laugh. The book famously blamed violent comic books for juvenile delinquency.

Can fiction inspire readers to emulate poor examples? One student argues that it can. Suicide in artwork can trigger imitation, she says: “That’s a case where I’m very much in favor of censorship.” In the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, for example, the protagonist kills herself in the final episode. “It’s very visual and very direct.”

The discussion bounces across centuries—from the Spanish Inquisition to the Parents Music Resource Center, whose campaign in the 1980s and ’90s led to parental advisory labels on albums—and back to *Seduction of the Innocent*. The book claimed to offer proof that comics cause violence, but “Wertham manipulated, exaggerated, and sometimes completely fabricated his very scientific-seeming data,” Palmer says. Its publication inspired book burnings across the country.

“I don’t think it makes sense as an argument against censorship to say art has no effect,” a male student points out. You have to have “respect for the power of art.”

A second male student counters that you can’t claim art causes suicide: such thinking is “post hoc, ergo propter hoc.” Only people who had already suicidal thoughts would be affected.

“You remind me of people who wanted to censor Lucretius,” says Palmer. In her first book, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Harvard University Press, 2014), she characterizes the ancient Roman poet’s ideas as “proto-atheist.”

But Renaissance censors were less worried about Lucretius than Luther, whose ideas might gain wider currency. “They thought atheism would only appeal to people who were at risk of damnation already,” she says. “It’s very parallel logic.”

If you were told that reading this book could send you to Hell, would you keep reading?”

That’s the first sentence of *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*. An award-winning novelist as well as a historian, Palmer has managed to make her academic book into a page-turner.

Lucretius’ poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), rediscovered in 1417, lays out the ideas of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, set in verse to make them more appealing. From the perspective of the Catholic Church, it promotes extremely dangerous ideas. There’s no divine plan. The gods don’t hear human prayer; they never intervene in our world. Perhaps most devastating, the soul is mortal and there is no afterlife.

And yet Lucretius was read. By 1600, 30 print editions of *De rerum natura* had been produced; more than 30,000 people bought it. How did a book with such outré ideas achieve such wide circulation? And what did its readers think?

To find out, Palmer painstakingly analyzed readers’ comments and other markings in 52 handwritten manuscripts and 172 print copies. She traveled to libraries in Berlin, London, Milan, Paris, and Vatican City, among others. Where she looked at the same book. Over and over and over again.

As various commentators have pointed out over the centuries, it’s rather dry reading. “One of the things I rarely confess,” says Palmer, “is that despite having devoted years of my life to it, I really don’t like reading *De rerum natura* as much as reading what people said about it.”


Based on the marginalia written during the 1400s and 1500s, Lucretius’s earliest readers cared most about Greek and Latin vocabulary, the poetry—especially lines that were similar to other classical authors—and mentions of famous people or places.

Machiavelli’s copy (written in his own hand) was a stark exception: his notes are clustered in the passages on atomism.

Atomism explained how the world could function without gods, laying the groundwork for atheism. It also raised the possibility that nature could operate by its own internal laws, an idea essential to modern science.

Most early readers breezed right past it. “The fact that Machiavelli was exceptional for his day should surprise no one,” Palmer writes.

Palmer’s research belongs to a field called reception studies, or, less commonly, transformation studies, a term she prefers. “Reception implies that the object received is unchanged,” Palmer says, “as if the *Iliad* in 300 BC is the same as the *Iliad* in 1200 AD and the *Iliad* in 1500 AD, and the same *Iliad* we pull off the shelf in Barnes & Noble. That just isn’t true. We find new pieces, we take pieces away, we translate, we reinterpret. And the context in which we place and use things changes.”



Palmer's other creative projects include a play about Viking myths, featuring Renaissance-style polyphonic a cappella music. She performs as Loki, complete with red contact lenses.

“If you were told that reading this book could send you to hell, would you keep reading?”

*—Ada Palmer,
Reading Lucretius
in the Renaissance*



On the wall of Palmer's office in Stuart Hall hangs her great-grandmother's diploma. Ada Louise Wilcox, PhB 1913, studied education and went on to teach home economics at Northwestern. Palmer is named after her. Students who come to her office hours, she says, are often gratified to learn "how early women attended this university when they were excluded from so many."

Palmer began her own career in academia by quitting high school. At 16 she enrolled in Simon's Rock College of Bard in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Like the Hutchins College of the 1940s and early 1950s, Simon's Rock admits precocious 16-year-olds lacking high school diplomas. She studied history at Bryn Mawr and Harvard, earning a PhD in 2009, then taught at Texas A&M University. She's been at UChicago since 2014.

In addition to the censorship class, which was new this fall, Palmer teaches Italian Renaissance, Renaissance Humanism, Patronage and Culture in Renaissance Italy and Her Neighbors, and the Core course European Civilization I. This winter she's teaching History of Skepticism.

Palmer is known for teaching through quirky yet studious play. "I play a lot," says Palmer, who's partial to board games and historical costumes; last spring she

coorganized a Renaissance banquet (see recipe on page 32). "It's a form of immersive recreation, after which you return refreshed to other things that you're doing."

Her course on the Italian Renaissance, for example, includes a live-action role-playing game: a papal election circa 1490. She gives each student a packet about one of 50 historical figures, along with each figure's background, political allies, marriage alliances, coat of arms. The students negotiate, make alliances, trade money and titles, and compete to elect a pope, whose influence and military strength determine the outcome of a war.

If they had to memorize the material for a quiz, she says, they would struggle. But since it's for a game, they know it inside out within a few days. She's run the game four times, and the outcome is different every single time.

A sampling of the kind of evaluations she receives:

"Her lectures are like listening to someone tell really good stories."

"I left the class feeling like I'd had a religious experience."

"She got rounds of applause after the first and last days of class."

"She's literally the patron saint of the Italian Renaissance, Lorenzo de Medici reborn."

Palmer's driving passion is to understand

The papal election of 2016, held in Rockefeller Chapel.



how ideas change over time. After early obsessions with World War I and the Enlightenment, she settled on the Italian Renaissance, a period when “ideas about science, religion, and the world which had developed in the Middle Ages suddenly met those of the ancient world,” she writes on her website. “All at once many beliefs, scientific systems, and perceived worlds clashed, mixed, and produced an unprecedented range of new ideas.”

Palmer brings the same set of preoccupations to her creative work, which she describes as “future historical fiction.” She’s written three books in the Terra Ignota series: *Too Like the Lightning* (2016), *Seven Surrenders* (2017), and *The Will to Battle* (2017), all published by Tor Books.

The fact that she’s published three novels in two years—while teaching, researching, and working toward tenure—is deceptive, Palmer says. She began writing the books in grad school; it took years to find a publisher.

In a talk at 57th Street Books last spring, Palmer described the world she’s created. The novels are set in the 25th century. In the same way that people of the Renaissance were fascinated by ancient Greece and Rome, the people of her imagined 25th century are fascinated by the Enlightenment.

Because of a system of flying cars, “you can go anywhere in two hours. The whole world is commuting distance. Socially speaking, that collapses the world into the neighborhoods of a city.” With geographic nations no longer important, children choose which nongeographic nation (called a “hive”) to join once they come of age.

Palmer came up with the idea while living at an academic institute in Florence, Italy, together with researchers from all over the world. Many of them had children, who very quickly “created their own pidgin language out of the 15 different languages they spoke.” The children had connections to two, three, sometimes four countries. The notion of citizenship to their country where they were born seemed arbitrary: “Citizenship was language, culture, connections, not geography.”

Contrary to the dystopian trend in recent fantasy and science fiction, Palmer’s world seems to be a utopia—but it’s underpinned by censorship. To prevent another Church War, all public talk of religion is banned. The books themselves begin with a page of censor’s permissions, warning the reader that the book “discusses religious beliefs of real and living persons and therefore is a particularly dangerous text that should be approached carefully.”

For the October 24 class on continental vs. British censorship practices, Palmer has brought a copy of the Catholic Church's 1948 *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of prohibited books).

The index was first published in 1559; the edition she's displaying on the overhead projector was the last.

"Who still uses this in 1948?" someone wants to know.

"Pious people," says Palmer.

After the Second Vatican Council, which brought far-reaching reforms to the church in the 1960s, the index was no longer produced. Nonetheless, "the Vatican still maintains a list of 'discouraged' films," Palmer says. "The *Avatar* movie made it on."

Today's assigned readings include the pamphlet *Areopagitica* (1644), subtitled *A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parliament of England*.

One student summarizes Milton's argument: "If you're a good person, a bad book isn't going to corrupt you. If you're a bad person, a good book isn't going to do anything."

"In the context of his most famous work, knowledge of good and evil is inherent in humans," another student adds. "The free exchange of ideas—good ideas and bad ideas in books—allows people to come to a greater understanding of good and evil."

Palmer, who is prone to historical digressions, explains how itinerant pamphlet sellers—often on foot—brought printed news and sermons to even the smallest hamlets. Her description is so vivid, it's like she has traveled to Reformation England by TARDIS and observed such sellers personally.

Books were sold as "naked pages," she continues; you had to take them to a bindery and choose the binding yourself. "Wealthy people have fancy covers. Poorer people have simple parchment, enough to protect the pages," she says.

"When you go into a rare books library, you can tell at a glance: there's an aristocrat's copy, there's a scholar's copy."

Did people who owned books read the entire thing? a woman wants to know.

"Great question," says Palmer. "No. Even as far back as the 1560s, people were already complaining that wealthy people fill their houses with books and never read them."

Another woman has a related question: Did you have to own a book to read it?

"Around universities there were book rental shops," Palmer explains. "You were encouraged to write notes in the margins because it increased the value for the next reader."

It also left a priceless written record for Palmer and other historians: an insight into what centuries-dead readers were thinking about as they read.

Like her Terra Ignota characters, who are not allowed to discuss religion or gender, Palmer has kept certain aspects of her life quiet over the years. In her previous teaching job, she told just one colleague that she wrote fiction. Her colleague's advice: don't tell anyone else, and publish under a pseudonym, or you won't be taken seriously in academia.

By the time Palmer was interviewing at UChicago, she had a book deal. She had not used a pseudonym. So she asked Tor not to make an announcement until her job search was over.

The success of those books brought her to the World Science Fiction Convention in Helsinki last August. Palmer was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, while *Too Like the Lightning* was a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Novel.

When she won the Best New Writer Award, Palmer wrote in a blog post, she "mounted the stage with difficulty, leaning heavily on my cane." She hadn't intended to, but she gave a speech about invisible disability.

"I have never discussed my invisible disability in public before," Palmer wrote. But sometimes, like the night before the awards ceremony, "the pain sets in ferociously, too much to hide." The cause of her chronic pain, Palmer explained, is complicated: Crohn's disease, polycystic ovary syndrome, and other factors.

In the same post Palmer, who was diagnosed during graduate school, explained why she self-censored for more than a decade. "Being public about disability (especially for women) so often results in attacks from the uglier sides of the internet, a dangerous extra stress while I'm working hard to manage my symptoms," she wrote. She also worried that it might affect her academic future. (Palmer was awarded tenure this past December.)

On her "pain days," she can't do anything except lie down. If she feels up to it, she watches Shakespeare DVDs. She estimates she lost 80 days to pain last academic year. In her blog post Palmer lists all the things she wanted to do, but couldn't: promotion for her second novel, a new CD with her folk band Sassafras, the fourth Terra Ignota book, more academic publications, more blogs.

Two years ago, she thought she might have to miss class to have surgery. For the first time, she told her students why.

This led to a long class discussion about invisible disability, mental illness as an invisible disability, how invisible disability is political. Afterward 12 different students came to her office hours to talk more and thank her for having the conversation.

The students' "incredibly warm reaction" gave Palmer the strength to have similar conversations with her colleagues and department chairs. Since then, she's told her students about her disability during the first meeting of every class. "It's been a very powerful experience," she says, "beginning to talk about it openly."



Examples of marginalia and illustrations in copies of *De rerum natura*, reproduced in Palmer's book. The sketches on the far left page depict possible shapes of atoms.

On November 28, the final class, an undergrad named Olivia has a censored text to share. It's *Breaking Dawn* (Little, Brown, 2008) from the Twilight series, with the sex scene redacted by her mother. The class laughs uproariously. "I really loved *Twilight* and wanted to read *Breaking Dawn*," Olivia explains. "But my sister ratted me out to my mother. She half whited-out, half Sharpied the book, so I could read it in the sixth grade."

The pages, spread open on the overhead projector, have a sloppy mix of white and black over the offending lines. McManus picks at the tiny, uneven remnants of pages that were ripped out in their entirety.

(In the exhibit, Palmer explains later, the book will be displayed next to a Renaissance astronomy treatise that also features blacked-out text and missing pages, courtesy of the Inquisition.)

"It's such a perfect example," Palmer says with enthusiasm.

"I'm glad it can be put to use," Olivia says.

One of the men in the class asks how Olivia felt. "I was like"—she shrugs. "I knew she was going to do it."

The discussion circles around the claim that the same censorship act can feel less offensive if it's done by a parent rather than a teacher or the Board of Education. "The closer to power, the sketchier the same book act can feel," says Palmer.

"There's a sense of care with a parent," a woman student agrees. "That they're doing it for your own good."

Near the end of the class, Palmer returns to the notion of parental love. "In that context I wanted to talk about Diderot a bit." Denis Diderot, the chief editor of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-72), was driven to preserve humanity's achievements in case a new Dark Age should ever come.

Privately, he was an atheist who wrote "beautiful, subtle, intimate, magnificent pieces," Palmer says. "The most philosophically sophisticated atheist of his time." Yet he published nothing about atheism—not even anonymously. His work was not published until after the death of his daughter.

Her voice catches unexpectedly; Palmer is weeping. "His daughter was a devout Catholic," she says. "He didn't want her to be sad that he was going to hell. It's one of the most touching cases I've found in the historic record."

Diderot also wrote letters to the other intellectuals of the Enlightenment, asking them to self-censor: "Don't criticize the king too much yet, don't criticize the Church too much yet. We have to be silent until the *Encyclopedia* is done," Palmer says. "In a sense Diderot is the person who most slowed down the Enlightenment" with his own self-censorship.

"How can we feel about that moment of complex tenderness and love?" she asks the class. "It challenges how we think about censorship. It's another profound part of this conversation." ❁